

WESTERN MARYLAND RAILWAY BRIDGE
(Spring Gap Underpass)
Spanning MD Route 51 at Spring Gap
Cumberland vicinity
Allegany County
Maryland

HAER No. MD-115

HAER
MD
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

National Park Service
Northeast Region
Philadelphia Support Office
U.S. Custom House
200 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, P.A. 19106

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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
WESTERN MARYLAND RAILWAY BRIDGE
(Spring Gap Underpass) HAER No. MD-115

Location: Spanning MD Route 51 at Spring Gap, Cumberland vicinity
Allegany County, Maryland

Date of Construction: 1932

Engineer: Western Maryland Railway and Maryland State Roads Commission

Present Owner: C&O Canal National Historic Park

Present Use: Underpass

Significance: The Western Maryland Railway Bridge (Spring Gap Underpass) is significant as a component of the 34-mile section of the Western Maryland Railway, which was acquired by the United States for the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park, has regional significance as a protected remnant of one of the last major phases of trans-Allegheny railroad expansion in the early 20th century. The engineering sophistication of this line is most dramatically indicated by the six Potomac River bridges and three tunnels crossing the Paw Paw Bends within a 12-mile segment of the route.

Project Information: An evaluation by the Maryland State Highway Administration advised removal of the structure. To mitigate the adverse effect of federal undertakings in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, a Memorandum of Agreement among the Federal Highway Administration, the Maryland State Historic Preservation Office, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and the State Highway Administration stipulated HABS/HAER recordation of the underpass. This documentation was undertaken to fulfill that stipulation.

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DESCRIPTION OF BRIDGE AND SETTING

The Western Maryland Railway bridge over Maryland Route 51 at Spring Gap, built in 1932 is a single track carried on 10 thirty six inch, 300 pound I-beams, encased in concrete on skewed concrete abutments. The length of the structure is 53 feet, six inches; its height is 13 feet, 6 inches, and its width is 29 feet. The plans were developed by the Maryland State Roads Commission in consultation with the Western Maryland Railroad.

The Western Maryland Railway Bridge at Spring Gap is a component of the 34-mile-long abandoned West Maryland Railway right-of-way between milepost 126 at the intersection of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal and Long Ridge Road, Woodmont, and milepost 160 just west of Maryland Route 51, North Branch. For the most part, the right-of-way closely parallels the Potomac River and the C&O Canal running along the north (Maryland) bank of the river. Downstream from Paw Paw, West Virginia, however, the line crosses bends in the river six times, transferring seven miles of the right-of-way to West Virginia, and tunnels through three mountainous intervening fingers of land on the Maryland side.

The line had a single track with occasional parallel sidings. The track and most ties were removed shortly after the line's abandonment in 1975, but the road bed and other structural features are largely intact, unaltered, and in fair-to-good condition. The roadbed itself is composed of a limestone sub-base approximately two feet deep with a layer of packed cinders or pea gravel on top. Numerous cuts and fills maintain a nearly level grade through hilly terrain. In several areas retaining walls of cross-tie cribbing are used for stabilizing slopes. Approximately 160 culverts, most constructed of concrete or terra cotta pipe, provide drainage beneath fills; only those of 6' or more in diameter are individually discussed in the National Register nomination form. The Potomac bridge piers and abutments were built wide for later double tracking, which was never carried out. Steel beams serve as mileposts.

HISTORY OF THE WESTERN MARYLAND RAILWAY AND THE BRIDGE AT SPRING GAP

The Western Maryland Railway Company originated with a state charter in 1852 as the Baltimore, Carroll, and Frederick Rail Road Company, so designated until the following year. After initial financial difficulties, the first 10-mile segment of track from Relay House to Owing Mills, Maryland, was laid between 1857 and 1859. In 1873 the Western Maryland was extended west to the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal at Williamsport in expectation of receiving a major share of the canal's coal cargo for transport to Baltimore; but the railroad lacked its own line into the seaport city and financially burdened by having to pay for the use of competitor's trackage.

Between 1874 and 1902 the Western Maryland Railroad underwent major expansion under the presidency of John Mifflin Hood, rising from local to regional status. In 1892 the Western Maryland-controlled Potomac Valley Rail Road extended the line from Williamsport west to Big Pool and across the Potomac to Cherry Run, West Virginia, through which the Baltimore and Ohio Rail Road passed. This addition provided a lucrative link between the B & O and the Philadelphia and Reading. At the eastern end, the desired connection with tidewater in Baltimore was not achieved until 1904 with the extension to and construction of Port Covington.

The latter extension was part of the final major expansion of the Western Maryland under the Fuller Syndicate, which acquired the City of Baltimore's major interest in 1902. Among the principals was George Gould, son of the notorious Jay and inheritor of the Missouri Pacific and Wabash railroads, who planned the new acquisition as a link in a transcontinental system under syndicate control. To this end a survey was immediately undertaken to extend the line 60 miles west from Big Pool to Cumberland. Since the B&O already held the preferred alignment along the south bank of the Potomac, the Western Maryland was forced to use the opposite bank and undertake sophisticated grade engineering to achieve superiority over its competitor.

Construction on this extension, including the portion including the underpass at Spring Gap, began August 1, 1903. The engineers sought to minimize grades by closely following the river and the C&O Canal along its north bank, in place having retaining walls rise directly from the canal and mountainsides or the parallel National Road. At the great river loops between Hancock, Maryland, and Paw Paw, West Virginia, however, the railroad cut boldly through the mountainous intervening fingers of land in Maryland, across the river and around the bends in West Virginia with three tunnels totaling a mile and a half in length and six bridges totaling over a mile long. Train traffic opened to Cumberland on this route March 15, 1906.

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At Cumberland the Western Maryland connected with the West Virginia Central System, acquired by the Fuller Syndicate in 1905 and reaching southwest to Elkins, West Virginia and the rich surrounding coal fields. The final expansion of the Western Maryland came in 1910 to 1912 with construction of a line from Cumberland northwest to Connelville, Pennsylvania, which provided transcontinental connections. This occurred under reorganized management, the Fuller Syndicate have overextended itself and lost control on 1901. Although George Gould's dream of his own transcontinental system was dashed, his expansion of the Western Maryland and the subsequent link to other track at Connelville gave this regional railroad the shortest route from Pittsburgh to Baltimore and one of the best engineered crossings of the Alleghenies with a .80% ruling grade eastbound, the direction of most traffic. The predominant cargo was coal and other freight, inspiring the Western Maryland's sobriquet, "Fast Freight Lane".

The Western Maryland retained autonomy until 1972, when it was acquired by the Chessie System, a recent combination of the Chesapeake and Ohio and B&O Railroads. In 1975 sections of the Western Maryland duplicative of other Chessie System track were abandoned, including the 34-mile stretch between Woodmont and North Branch addressed by this nomination. Because much of this stretch closely paralleled the historic C&O Canal and provided opportunity for adverse development should it fall into other private hands, the National Park Service got legislative authority to acquire it in 1978 and did so in 1980. At the time of purchase the Service committed itself to relinquishing fee title to the seven-mile portion of the right-of-way in West Virginia subject to suitable development controls there.

Removal of the tracks and ties upon the line's abandonment in 1975 compromised the integrity of the roadbed, but the route retains essential continuity and most of it may be traveled by vehicle or on foot. The bridges, tunnels, and other structural features retain high integrity.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

National Park Service

1981 National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form for "Western Maryland Railway Right-of-Way, Milepost 160", Barry Mackintosh, Regional Historian, National Capitol Region.

State of MD, Department of Geology, Mines, & Water Resources

1953 Map of Allegany County (MD) Showing Topography and Election Districts, US Geological Survey, Revised 1956.

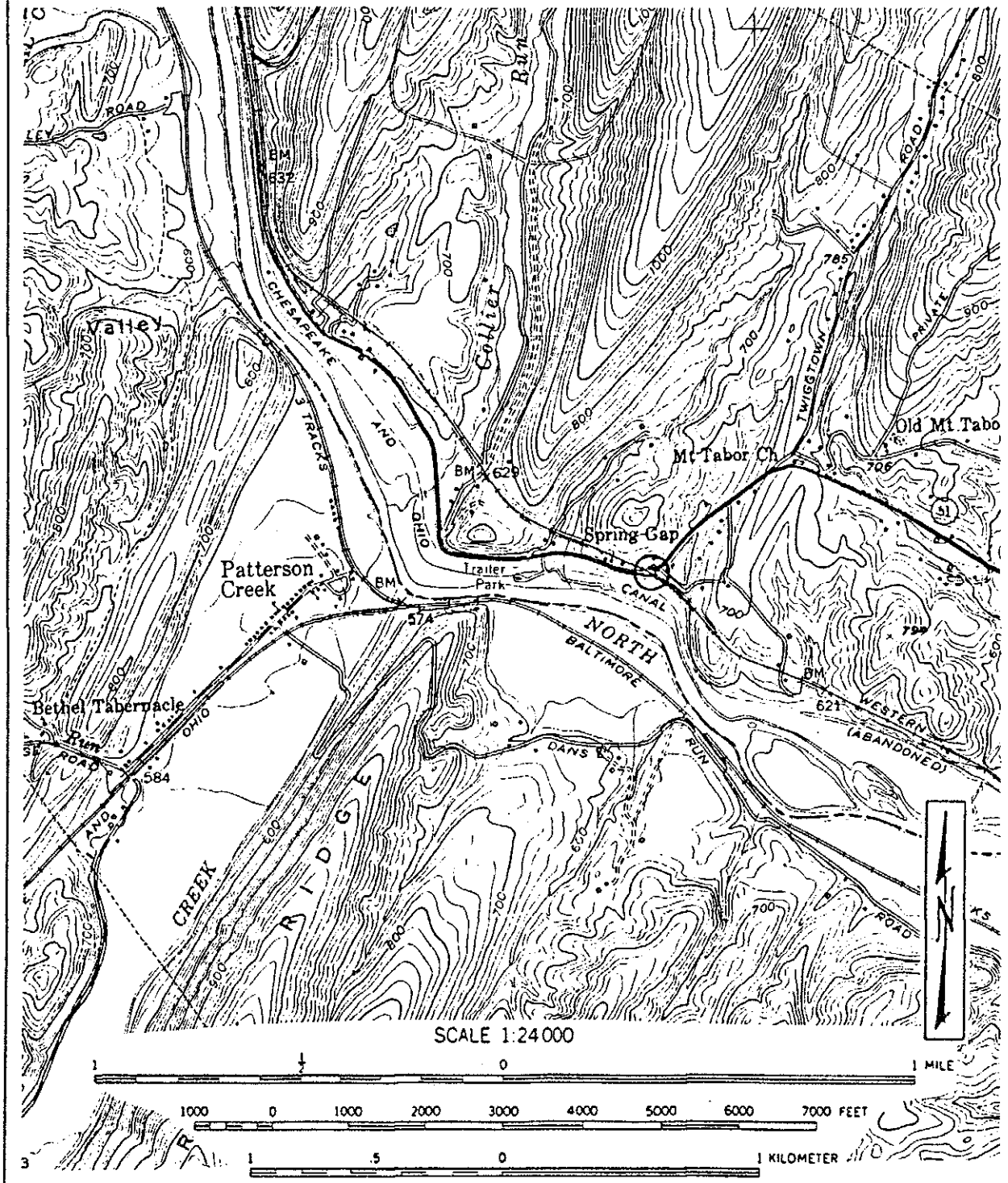
US Department of the Interior

1949 Geological Survey Quadrangle Map, Patterson Creek, MD-W.VA., revised 1951.

Western Maryland Railway & Maryland State Roads Commission

ca. 1932 As-Built Drawing of the Western Maryland Railway Bridge (Spring Gap Underpass); unreproduceable copy; location of original not known, compilers are conducting a reasonable search for the original or a suitable copy.

LOCATION MAP
(Patterson Creek, MD-W.VA USGS Quad Map, revised 1974)



HISTORIC MAP
(Patterson Creek, MD-W.VA USGS Quad Map, 1949, revised 1951)

